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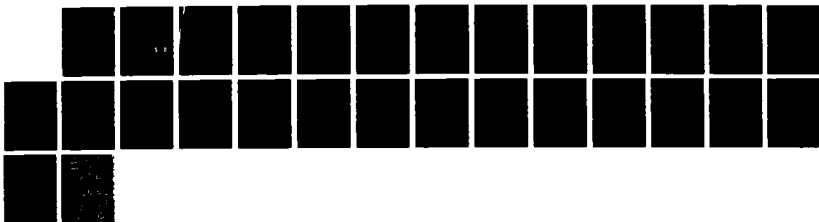
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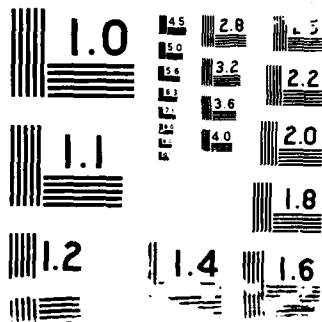
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MILITARY USE OF WOMEN IN COMBAT: AN HISTORICAL
PERSPECTIVE

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the course MN 4111,
Women in the Military; Professor Elster

March 1979

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W.C. Keller and H.M. Scarangella

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. PURPOSE AND BASELINE

The ~~general~~ purpose of this paper is to contribute to research on Women in the Military. More specifically, it will be our objective to summarize historical data on the use of women in combat. To structure the presentation, the Brookings Institution text Women and the Military will be used as a baseline and we shall attempt to expand and or contradict Binkin and Bach (7) in two areas:

- Chapter 2, "Looking Back" (U.S. history), and
- the Appendix, "Foreign Experience".

Additionally, women combatants in ancient to 19th century history will be briefly discussed.

B. HYPOTHESIS

History's message seems to be that within the scope of recent times, while women have been successfully utilized in the military to varying degrees, they have not been employed in the combat role in other than situations meeting three criteria:

- a defensive struggle;
- on one's own territory; and
- in an underdog role.

Further, it appears that in situations meeting these

criteria, the actual use of women in combat has been extremely rare when compared to the numbers of men involved in the fighting.



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II. FROM ANCIENT TO NINETEENTH CENTURY HISTORY

History provides some interesting, if not useful, legends and even more substantiated accounts of women in combat.

The "Amazons" depicted in Greek texts were an independent community of women at war with the masculine world. They lived apart from men except for seasonal sexual consort and reared only their female children. They allegedly were skilled horsepersons (sic) and fighters whose law required an Amazon to kill a man before she could mate (6). However, the Amazon fighting women seem to have been but a figment of the Greeks' mythological imagination, since the supposed Amazon territory always remained beyond the limits of the expanding Greek empire (17,19).

Use of the "amazon" term is encountered in at least two more cases. Francisco de Orellana claimed to be attacked by the "river Amazons" in South America circa the 16th century. More notably, In 1892, the French crushed the only authenticated "amazon" army when conquering the people of Dahomey on the coast of West Africa. These women had been formed into an army by King Agadja and trained into a fighting force by King Gezo. "They carried muskets, blunderbusses, duck guns, enormous knives and bows and arrows, and their method of warfare was surprise. They killed only in self defence as their aim was to capture slaves....." (17).

In Scandinavia, the value placed on fidelity and bravery manifested itself in tales of Viking Women. Among other

qualities, they were known for their reputation as "Warrior Women" who often accompanied the men on hunts for land and bounty. Blenda, one of the first "warrior queens from the north", was a Sweie who led an army of women to victory over the invading Danes.(21).

In several other instances, women have led troops in battle. Joan of Arc dressed in mens clothing and heard voices in combat (4,17), Boadicea led her English troops against the Roman hordes in the first century A.D.(4,17), Isabella of Spain had several suits of armor designed to accomodate her various stages of pregnancy (4) and General Juana Azurduy de Padilla of Bolivia led troops in the Andes against the Spaniards in the war for liberation(4).

So, it appears from myth and other data sources that women have indeed served historically in combat, even as effective leaders. However, many of the accounts (Amazons, Vikings) tend to be discredited as legend. Nonetheless, the last documented case seems to support the earlier hypothesis: the Dahomey Army, representing women in combat, was in fact engaged in a defensive battle on their own soil, presumably as an underdog, in their fight with the French.

III. U.S. HISTORY

This section expands on and in one case disputes chapter 2 of Binkin and Bach while dealing with the history of U.S. women in or near combat.

A. THE REVOLUTION

The history of American women in combat starts with our first war as a nation. Camp followers accompanied the men of the Continental Army throughout the war. Most certainly volunteers, these women performed as cooks, domestics, nurses & load bearers. There were of course those who were simply prostitutes. Most, however, were wives, relatives or friends of the soldiers who wanted to be with their men & to help in the war against the British. (13)

The most distinguished camp follower was Martha Washington. Staying away during the fighting she was at Valley Forge where she organized other women to transcribe messages, roll bandages & mend clothing. Mary Ludwig Hays earned the name Molly Pitcher because of her practice of carrying water to the men of her husband's compatriots in Proctor's Corps of Artillery from Pennsylvania. She remained during the fighting to help man the artillery pieces. Another "Molly", Margaret Corbin, also served with her husband in the artillery. When he was killed she continued to operate his gun until she too was wounded.

The British brought their camp followers with them.

They assumed the same types of jobs as their American counterparts. Both sides benefitted from the work of their women volunteers however neither actually employed women as part of their armies.

B. WORLD WAR II

While no American women were employed in actual combat roles, there were cases when female military members proximity to the fight is worthy of note.

Nurses in the Pacific theater were trained in full combat packs for amphibious movement. The fall of Bataan and Corregidor exposed our nurses to enemy artillery fire, scores of wounded, scanty rations and headless bodies. Sixty seven Army nurses left on Corregidor were captured and spent 2.5 years as POWs in the civilian internment camp at Santo Tomas (all 67 survived). (4,1).

In Europe, the Army nurses apparently often endured battle field conditions and were bombed. Six lost their lives when the Germans bombed the beach hospital at Anzio. (4,1).

One point of dispute arises with Binkin and Bach concerning the experience of the Fifth Army WACs on the Italian peninsula. The authors appear to convert a quick discussion of women deployed overseas in chapter 2 to the sweeping generalization in chapter 8 that women (WACs) were "routinely deployed forward...." (citing the 5th Army WACs as an example). (7). According to Treadwell's volume, the employment was an experiment never involving more than 60 women and "the dangers of a combat area did not present any great problem" (in that their lives were never really

threatened). Italian service troops set up their tents and laborers helped them load their gear on trucks for movement. (25). Considering these facts, one may wish to qualify the text's "routine forward deployment" statement.

C. KOREA AND VIETNAM

Again, women did not serve in combat roles, per se, but they were close to the action.

Army nurses in Korea retreated with the first onslaught. Later, front line M.A.S.H. nurses were actually under fire, retreated, evacuated, tore down hospital tents, put up tents and stayed with their troops. Living conditions have been described with the terms "stench, filth, and disease." (4).

Indications are that the nurses in Vietnam upheld their corps' tradition, perhaps most notably at Pleiku during the Tet offensive. An initial decision was made to evacuate them, but to a women, they volunteered to stay. (4).

D. SUMMARY

While American women have certainly been close to the fighting, we found no historical precedence for their institutionalized participation in combat. Our omission stands in spite of the situation surrounding our war for independence when our forefathers and mothers were at times in the defensive mode, always on their own soil, and most certainly the underdog.

IV. FOREIGN EXPERIENCE

This section expands the Appendix, "Foreign Experience," to the Brookings text. Omissions herein are only intended to represent the nonavailability of amplifying or contradicting information.

A. USSR

Russian history probably shows the greatest use of women in combat during this century.

1. world war one

In World War I, women were used briefly on the front in what might have been the first use of women in modern warfare. Kerensky approved the organization of a women's battalion under Maria Botchkareva. Additionally, a women's guard surrounded the Winter Palace. Both of these ventures failed perhaps due to supply shortages and or political bickering: the women's battalion had to flee from male soldiers venting their hostility against the Czarist Botchkareva; the Winter Palace guard broke at the first onslaught. (1,4). As a milestone in history, Princess Eugenie Shakhovskaya began operations as a reconnaissance pilot at the front in 1914 (with special permission from the Tzar). Since reconnaissance was the primary military employment of aircraft at that time, the Princess might be considered the first female combat pilot in the world. (17).

2. bolshevik revolution

Russian women participated in a striking variety of functions, many of them novel, in this war. They carried out every conceivable support task on the home front, and served in medical and combat capacities as in earlier wars, but on a broader scale and in a much more organized context.

Though the total number of fighting women was larger than it was in Kerensky's army, the idea of large, all women units does not appear to have caught on. More common were company sized women's detachments which performed police work in the towns and combat duty in time of enemy seige. But there were also front line units whose performance was favorable. During the Polish campaign the aggressive onslaught of a company of women was credited with saving a faltering regiment (all but one member of the company perished). (22).

3. world war two

In World War II, Russian women served routinely as aircraft fighter pilots, tank drivers and commanders, snipers, guerillas, and front line infantry. They operated machine guns, antiaircraft batteries and artillery. Women also taught bayonet fighting to border guards. (1).

Soviet women were initially used to free males for combat in the face of an acute manpower shortage. In fact, all childless females were conscripted if not filling vital civilian jobs. As we have seen, women did fight, but they were primarily used in the rear area fields of medicine, air traffic control, air observers and general clerical and

administrative. (4).

Even as a minority, the Russian women combatants amassed some respectable statistics, especially in aviation:

- the 125th Day Bomber Regiment took part in battles at Stalingrad, Byelorussia, the Baltic States and East Prussia.

- the 586th Air Defense Fighter Interceptor Regiment flew 4419 sorties, took part in 125 combats and destroyed 38 enemy planes.

- the 588th Night Bomber Regiment fought throughout the war; Major General Marina Checkneva was credited with 810 night combat missions.

- While the the above examples are taken from the three all women regiments, some elite women fought along with the men. Among them, Lydia Litvyak was the top women scorer with 12 victories before being killed in a mixed Guard air unit.

All told, the involvement of Soviet women in defense of their country against the German invasion was truly significant. Consider:

Russian women decorated in WW II.....over 100,000
Those with Hero of the Soviet Union.....86
Those with all three classes of the Order of Glory...4
(By comparison, 4 British women were awarded the George Cross, 50 the George Medal). (1,4,17).

4. miscellaneous

An interesting view on the Soviet use of women in combat is expressed by Quester. He claims the Women's Regiment and the female fighter pilots were an exercise in public relations, designed to impress the outside world with

Russia's underdog position. (19).

Outside the military sphere but interesting from a naval viewpoint, is the fact that the Russian woman, Anna Shchetinina, was the first sea captain. She qualified in 1935 and took command of the diesel ship Chavicha. On the eve of the war in 1941, she entered the Navigation Department of the Leningrad Institute of Water Transport Engineers and since then has trained hundreds of sailors. (17).

5. today

Perhaps ironically, but not surprisingly, Russian women have returned to traditional roles in the military, and in much fewer numbers than their U.S. counterparts. The end of WW II signaled that "normalcy" had returned and women were sent if not to hearth at least to construction sites, offices and factories. Today, women in the Soviet (and all Warsaw Pact) armed forces work as clerks, air traffic controllers and in medical services. (1,4).

B. PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA

The communist revolution provided a setting for the Chinese use of women in combat. It appears that many "oppressed country girls" joined the Red Army in the revolutionary civil war of the 1920's and 30's. Some women volunteers went to military training at the Red Army Academy. There were 30 women in the First Front Army, 13 in the Second Front Army (one of whom was the heroine Li Chen, who later became the first woman Chinese general), and about 1000 women in the Fourth Front Army. (15).

While data is scarce, today women are apparently utilized as pilots, serve in the militia, and are allowed to join the Navy in addition to employment in traditional secretary and air traffic control military jobs.

At least one account states that women are used as fighter pilots (4). Another source confirms that women have been trained as pilots in the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) since 1950, but only mentions their serving in transports and jet airliners. An interesting aside is that Chinese women routinely continue to fly after bearing children. It appears that the air force service has set up nurseries and kindergartens to help care for the children so that "their mothers work with ease of mind." One pilot, Wu Hsiu- mei, is a 44 year old mother of 2 with 3000 flying hours to her credit. (8).

Chinese women are also employed in militias serving to defend offshore islands and the South China Sea coast. They are armed, rigorously trained to meet the needs of actual fighting, and as units coordinate operations with the PLA. Typically, it appears the militias use women in fishing communities where the men are frequently at sea. (8).

Another report confirms that women are encouraged to enlist in the Navy; in fact, it seems parents are proud to have their daughters join the Navy. (10).

C. GERMANY

A notable omission in the Binkin and Bach text was Germany's WW II use of women in anti aircraft activities, which basically was the only Nazi use of women in uniform. Their role was not to fire the cannon, but to handle a fair

amount of the information sorting and voice communications for fire and interceptor control. It is difficult to view this participation as a pure combat role. Women's part in air defense can be viewed as a moral form of war, protecting cities against the "immoral" aerial bombardment. Also, one might not consider AA duty to entail risk, since the women would presumably be in the target cities anyway. (19).

D. MOSLEMS

Islam is a masculine based religion, and it might be interesting to monitor women's military roles as intra national factions bicker for power in Arab and other Moslem influenced countries. For example, Arabs generally believe that women ("erotic creatures") cannot fight as warriors; yet, Iran's "White Revolution" provided that women had to serve in the army for six months. (14).

E. GREAT BRITIAN

The enormous manpower needs of WW I provided the incentive to use women in non nursing roles. Drawing upon existing para military groups such as the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry (FANY) organizations began to emerge which were given to more direct support roles. The Women's Legion combined with FANY & the Women's Voluntary Reserve to work as cooks, waitresses & drivers for troops stationed in England. (24)

The Army Council authorized the formation of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps (WAAC) in February 1917. Joined in September by the Women's Legion its role expanded to

overseas duties in France. The Queen assumed the title of Commandant in Chief giving rise to the name Queen Mary's Army Auxiliary Corps (QMAAC). Although not actually part of the British Army their leaders were accorded officer status while the rank & file were considered to be privates.

The types of jobs the QMAAC performed increased to include clerks, telephone operators, telegraphers & gardeners. Unable to convince the U.S. Congress to enlist women General Pershing accepted QMAAC members in his Allied Expeditionary Force. Generally suffering only minor casualties some women were killed by artillery attacks on the bases at which they served. Not serving as combatants or in front line units their casualty rate was low. The last QMAAC unit left Europe on 26 Sep 1921 with the last Army unit and was demobilized the following day.

Two other volunteer organizations were formed to support the British Navy & Air Force. The Women's Royal Navy Service (WRNS) was formed in 1917 followed by the Women's Royal Air Force (WRAF) in 1918. Like the QMAAC, neither was given full military status. The WRAF's 32000 members rivalled the 35000 women in the QMAAC with both being considerably larger than the 7000 member WRNS. (19) All these groups performed the same type duties however the WRNS actually served aboard boats with the Royal Navy.

Despite their laudable service in WW I the women's organizations remained inactive from 1921 until 1936. As the threats of war again grew more ominous the Emergency Services was formed as a nucleus around which a women's force could be built. By 1938 the War Office sponsored the Auxiliary Territorial Service (ATS) which served under the Air Force Association & the County Territorial Service. As service functions were more clearly defined the ATS (later called the Women's Royal Army Corps) became the Army

auxiliary. Concurrently the WRNS was reactivated and the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF) was formed.

As in WW I these groups began as volunteer organizations. They essentially served without pay but were given uniforms & quasi military status as before. By 1941 it became necessary to draft women into the ATS and WAAF. These conscripts were then salaried & became official members of the military. The WRNS remained a volunteer group. During the three years when conscription took place 125000 women were drafted & another 430000 volunteered making 12% of the British force female. (7)

The women's duties changed along with their status in WW II. Technically assigned to non combat jobs they operated most of the air defense searchlight units and by 1943 worked with the air defense gun crews as range finders & coordinators with the men actually firing the guns. WRNS worked as cryptologists, manned harbor craft & worked as maintenance personnel. Women did virtually everything but fly in the WAAF. As in WW I women served overseas as well as at home. This expansion of duties resulted in 624 deaths, 98 missing in actions and 20 prisoners of war. A few of the deaths were French speaking female commandos dropped behind the German lines by parachute. These women worked with the French underground in their resistance movement against their German occupiers. (4). Probably the most famous commando leader & one of the few who escaped capture & execution was Nancy Wake. (1)

Unlike the end of WW I the women's organizations became permanent fixtures in the British army, navy & air force. The ATS, now called the Women's Royal Army Corps (WRAC) became a separate corps within the army run by its own officers. On the other hand the Women's Royal Air Force was fully integrated into the RAF to the extent that its members

could either command or be commanded by men. Only the WRNS remained an independent organization. (24) This arrangement remains today with women accounting for about 4% of Britain's military force.

Breaking tradition, over 200 women were recruited for duty with a specific regiment (the Ulster Defense Regiment) in 1976 & 77. This marked the first time women were not assigned to a WRAC unit. In this situation the women do not bear arms and serve in communications, border patrol & vehicle checkpoint capacities. As in WW II they technically are non combatants but they are serving side by side with men who are.

P. CANADA

The Northwest Rebellion in 1885 saw the first recognition of a nursing organization in the Canadian army. Among the 600000 odd Canadians who served in WW I were women. It is assumed that they, like the British QMAAC, served on the Continent in the traditional roles. There were Canadian coastal defense units in which women also presumably served.

Following a typical interwar period of demobilization the impending threat of a new war caused Canada to begin compulsory registration of women in 1940. Initial entrants joined the Voluntary Women's Corps. The formation of the Royal Canadian Air Force Women's Division in 1941 and the Women's Army Corps (WAC) and Royal Canadian Naval Service (RCNS) in 1942 replaced the Voluntary Women's Corps in a unique way. In each case the women actually served in, not with, their respective services. (18)

Although the stated purpose for the use of women was to free men for combat they did serve antiaircraft and coastal artillery units in Canada, on the Continent and in Britain. Demobilized in 1946 female participation had reached a height of 33000 among the three services.

Canada's commitment to NATO and its participation in Korea initiated a reinstatement of the enrollment of women in the services. The Air Force was the first to be allowed to enlist women in 1951 followed by the Army in 1954 and the Navy in 1955. Combined strength was about 5000 by 1960.

G. AUSTRALIA

As with many other countries Australia's use of women in the military began with its nurses in the South African War(1898). Although it sent several hundred thousand volunteers to serve in WW I it was not until 1940 and the Second World War that women were enlisted in the Army, Navy and Air Force. (18)

The conscripts performed the usual cook, clerk, communicator type functions until the length and intensity of the war demanded they move into less traditional jobs. The women, while restricted to service in Australia, did most anything they were physically capable of; from servicing torpedoes to operating shore defense bases.

The three women's services were disbanded at the end of the war only to be reinstated (on a permanent basis) in 1951, coincident with the war in Korea. Today they constitute about 5% of the 70000 man Australian force.

H. WOMEN GUERILLAS

Whereas the data concerning the history of women in combat in traditional type units is sparse their utilization in guerilla or resistance movements is rich. The very nature of guerilla warfare is such that neat organization plans and records of activities are fragmented and incomplete. Also, given that specific interest in women's participation in such movements is a recent phenomenon, most accounts make no explicit distinction between male & female membership or accomplishments. It seems safe to state that in any country which has been engaged in civil war or which was occupied by a foreign power women did take part in warfare.

Prior to Israeli independence women were active in the Haganah, the illegal Jewish army, to subvert British control. Colonel Ruth Muscal, Director of CHEN states, "When we had no choice, women were fighters. Women fought in underground movements during the years of British control, and they served together with the men in every way, in combat units with combat tasks, in the War of Independence in 1948." (5)

The Jewish people in Palestine were controlled by the British and surrounded by hostile Arabs. That they needed women as well as men to serve in the Haganah (and its predecessor the Hashomer) is unquestioned. The leadership resisted using women for actual combat until the 1930's. After a three year guerilla war with the Arabs women achieved near equality with their male colleagues. (1)

Under more pressure the Haganah allowed women to join the British Army (their previous guerilla target) at the onset of WW II. About 3000 volunteered and mainly served as cooks, nurses, drivers, etc. The British trained three

Jewish women as commandos. Dropped behind the lines they helped European Jews escape and also did some espionage work. The Germans caught and executed two of the women; now Israeli national heroines. (4)

By the time of the first Arab Israeli War in 1948 there were 10000 women and 50000 men in the Haganah. As in their guerilla roles earlier the women fought in this more formal war. In addition to ground combat roles women also flew reconnaissance missions. The popular image of the machine gun bearing Israeli woman is more fantasy than fact today. Considering their tenacious spirit in the formative years of the Jewish state it is easy to see what inspired that image.

The European theater in WW II was replete with female resisters from all countries and all walks of life. The Polish Countess Skarbek was very successful arranging escapes in east central Europe and later was sent by the British Special Operations Executive (SOE) to work in France. M.R.D. Foot explains that while such women earned all the press coverage it was the common women working in their own countries who made the consistently valuable contributions. As organizers, couriers, safe house keepers, drivers, cipher operators, nurses or assassins they justified the call for women's liberation. Prostitutes with a sense of daring and some imagination were most successful in rifling through the pockets of her high ranking companions and coming up with valuable information. (11) In short, women from all walks of life served their causes with courage, skill and tenacity as volunteers in the truest sense of the word.

Communications between resistance operatives and their parent organizations were a major problem. Women were instrumental in this area as messengers and radio operators. As the Israelis learned, female couriers were less likely to

be suspected and, if stopped, less likely to be vigorously searched for concealed messages. Radio communications required precise timing, patience and nimble fingers to send and copy code. Being very capable in these areas too women operated radio broadcast and terminal stations throughout Europe. (11)

The Nazis did not underestimate the contribution of the female resistance workers from France, Belgium or other central European countries. A special section of the Birkenau camp was set aside for them. (4) The largely anonymous Free French movement was adept in using women as spies, saboteurs and small arms smugglers. Many were wives whose husbands were also involved resisting the German occupation but Kedward notes that single women were not uncommon in the Vichy resistance. (16)

The Spanish Revolution prior to WW II found women serving on both sides. Franco's opponents in the republican militia operated very much like resistance units. One account describes how Franco ordered the execution of four militiawomen who, when captured, were armed. Breaking this cardinal rule of the regime cost them their lives. (23)

Yugoslavian women fought the Germans in the same way as other European underground members. Although cited for bravery in battle little is known of their role as leaders in combat. (4) Greek women guerillas helped clear a runway to be used by British planes to deliver supplies to support their organization, ELAS. (2) This airstrip near Neraidha was the first to have been built by the Allies on German occupied land.

The propagandized image of Cuban guerillas is based on far less fact than the popular image of Israeli women. Cuban women did participate on Casto's side during the revolution

but afterwards were relegated to political organizing roles. (4) Throughout Latin America, following Cuba's lead, women have been participants in extremist guerilla or terrorist movements. Most notable examples are Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay & Venezuela. To what extent they led guerilla actions is not clear.

There is no doubt that women fought, were killed, and succeeded in acts of sabotage and espionage in Viet Nam, Laos and Cambodia. (4) Again, data is sparse and there is little to substantiate the tales of fanatical hordes of women rushing to battle. More likely they worked in small groups and slid stealthily through the jungle. The Viet Cong were adept at using women in recruiting and indoctrination roles. Being a matriarchal society the prestige of the women was brought to bear in many ways to induce men to join. Donnell is quick to point out that sexual allure is forbidden in that society and its use as a recruiting device was virtually non existent. (20) Falling back on history (when the Trung sisters heroically led Vietnamese forces against the Chinese in the first century A.D.) and emphasizing the special role of women was enough of a motivator to fill the ranks of the Viet Cong.

All around the world in virtually all armed conflict women have served in guerilla or resistance movements. Their duties ran the gamut from mundane to spectacular. While the outcome probably was not solely of their doing no one questions their value in this role.

V. CONCLUSION

COL Trevor Dupuy, U.S.A.(ret), the military historian, noted that the occasions of the use of women in combat were extremely rare and, except for cases like Joan of Arc, had little impact on the outcome of the battle or war. (9).

Based on our findings, we must argue the latter assertion. It may be more realistic to state that at least during the Bolshevik revolution and WW II in Russia, for numerous Eastern and Western resistance and guerilla movements, and in the case of Israel's fight for independence, women indeed have contributed significantly to individual battles as well as to the overall effort.

Nevertheless, all such occasions seem to fit the criteria advanced in our earlier hypothesis. The wars which women have fought in recent history all fit the mold of:

- a defensive struggle
- on one's own territory, and
- in an underdog role

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